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PC shines as centre of entertainment universe

E-BIZ

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As the microchip invades the entertainment world, we are seeing a blurring of the concept of "entertainment equipment."

While the traditional entertainment industry talks about high-definition television as the wave of the future, the high-technology industry is making personal computers the centre of the TV universe.

Two Canadian companies are at the forefront of this revolution. Both ATI Technologies (**www.ati.com**) and Matrox (**www.matrox.com**) sell computer video cards that let you watch TV on your computer monitor.

It certainly changes the way you think about television. I've often found myself taking time off from a document that I've been working on in order to tune into CNN or CBC Newsworld to watch a breaking news story, all on my home office PC.

Such technology also lets you record TV shows directly to your PC, so that you can watch them later at your leisure.

The concept of computer as television doesn't stop there. Many people have buying high-quality videocassette recorders and big-screen TVs to put in place a home theatre, but I've taken the computer-based approach.

I plug my IBM Thinkpad, which is equipped with a DVD-ROM, into an Epson projector. The projector is normally used for computerized slide shows at a meeting or conference. But at home, it makes for a fabulous 100-inch TV image, with a picture quality that is nothing less than stunning.

Computer companies have been quick to recognize that the PC can rival traditional home entertainment equipment, and many of these firms market a "home theatre PC."

The fact that DVD is a format common to both entertainment and computer equipment is leading to some rather strange circumstances. On a recent cross- country flight, I brought along a few DVD movies to watch on my laptop, correctly guessing that I wouldn't like what the airline was showing. I could see a few people around the cabin, fascinated that I had my own personal "movie machine."

Astute observers of technology are aware that the role of computers in the world of entertainment is only beginning, and will become even more interesting as the massive bandwidth of the optical fibre world reaches into our home and offices.

Companies such as Nortel Networks and Lucent Technologies are working on fibre technology that allows the transmission of massive quantities of information. One recent study suggests that some of the leading-edge technology being researched at Lucent affiliate Bell Labs allows up to 500,000 movies to be transmitted simultaneously through a single optical fibre. When that type of capability emerges, the role of the computer in the entertainment world will be complete.

Of course, there is a downside: Entertainment companies are finding it increasingly difficult to protect their property.

Just a few weeks ago, instructions surfaced on the Internet as to how people can make copies of DVD movies. Although lawyers quickly managed to shut down a few of the sites that posted such information, the software is out there and readily available.

And so we see a giant global Whack-a-Mole game in progress. Just as lawyers slam one site containing the software, it pops up and becomes available in thousands of other locations.

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